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Reagan buys time with Philip Habib

Even as he prepares to announce victory, President Ferdinand Marcos is the real loser in the snap election that he had confidently held Feb. 7 in the Philippines. Expecting to win big in order to deflect American pressures for reform, he is reduced to trying to eke out a precarious victory in an obviously fraudulent vote count.

Far from again demonstrating his mastery of Filipino politics and the breadth of his popular mandate, he has been forced to watch the outpouring of enthusiastic support for his inexperienced, female rival. He has been made to realize, perhaps for the first time, how widely disliked is the corrupt regime that he and his wife, Imelda, have imposed on the long-suffering Filipino people.

Conversely, Mrs. Corazon Aquino has been able to unite and inspire the democratic opposition by her transparent honesty and steadily improving grasp of the issues. Hoping for the development of a healthy two-party system in the Philippines, Reagan officials are warning both sides that calls for massive street demonstrations and counter-demonstrations can only too easily play into the hands of the Communist Party of the Philippines.

Although there were a few defectors from the party line, the legal far-left mass organization, Bayan, the CPP itself, the New People's Army, and the National Democratic Front all boycotted the election campaign and dismissed it as an irrelevant bourgeois exercise. The Marxist strategists feared an Aquino victory because they correctly estimated that it would strengthen the Philippine political center, and they have a healthy respect for the strength of Mrs. Aquino's anti-Communist convictions.

A disputed and narrow Marcos victory, such as

seems the likely result, gives the Communists and their front groups the chance to join popular agitation against the Marcos regime and to build bridges to the moderate opposition. By running their own candidates on popular-front tickets, the Marxists plan to win some of the important local and regional elections scheduled for May.

Anticipating a Marcos victory, Philippine Marxists boasted, "After the election, it will be our ball game." The disciplined Communist cadres are well-trained for street fighting

and know how to transform a peaceful demonstration into a violent upheaval that polarizes the society.

On the basis of reliable intelligence, U.S. officials know that there are deep divisions within the armed forces of the Philippines: Gen. Fabian Ver and his 33 overage generals have the allegiance of only part of the army, and a reform movement of mid-level professional Philippine officers has called for the prompt retirement of the corrupt senior officers.

In a worst-case scenario, White House officials can see Mr. Marcos calling out the army to put down rioting crowds, only to find the army itself split down the middle, with many of the younger officers and soldiers going over to the side of the democratic opposition. As the country teetered on the edge of civil war, the Communist front groups could be counted on to pour gasoline on the flames, while the 23,000 armed guerrillas of the New People's Army waited for the decisive moment to intervene.

With the democratic institutions of the Philippines at stake, which are the only lasting guarantee of American access to the bases of Subic Bay and Clark Field, President Reagan has a dangerous tightrope to walk.

On the one hand, he cannot cut off all U.S. aid to the Marcos regime, so long as it controls the government and the army, without pushing the Philippines into the arms of the Communists.

On the other hand, he cannot ignore the complaints of Mrs. Aquino and the democratic opposition against the fraudulence of the election without risking the radical polarization of the society. Members of the U.S. delegation to observe the election warn that the large numbers of young people who voted for Mrs. Aquino could easily be radicalized, if they think the United States is sacrificing their democratic rights in order to make a deal with Mr. Marcos on the bases.

Faced with this dilemma, President Reagan has no choice but to perform a delicate balancing act on the high wire of presidential decision-making.

By appointing Philip C. Habib as special envoy, the president has won some time, and Mr. Habib will be looking at ways to put distance between the United States and a Marcos regime that claims a tainted victory.

Early discussions with the younger leaders of Mr. Marcos's KBL party and with Mrs. Aquino and her advisers can be quietly directed toward persuading sick and aging Mr. Marcos to retire in favor of the vice president. Then the way would be open to the holding of regional elections in May that could be widely seen as fair and honest, and there is the possibility of scheduling a new presidential election.

Under competent leadership, a reformed Philippine army could then be given the help it needs to cut the New People's Army down to size.

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